

# A mixed methods study examining how menopausal symptoms are related to a woman's body image, exercise behaviour and wellbeing

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**Title:** A mixed methods study examining how menopausal symptoms are related to a woman's body image, exercise behaviour and wellbeing.

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**Abstract (word limit: 350)**

**Introduction:** Menopause represents the change from a woman's fertile to non-fertile period, and the transition from a younger to older adult; with potential to impact how a woman thinks and feels about herself and her body, her health-related behaviour and wellbeing. This study aimed to study the relationships between menopausal symptoms, appearance evaluation, exercise behaviour, and a range of wellbeing indicators using a mixed methods approach.

**Methods:** A mixed method design was used with full informed consent from participants. A nationwide survey was carried out with women ( $n=271$ ;  $M$  age 53,  $SD = 4$ ) who considered themselves to be experiencing the natural menopausal transition/climacteric to investigate the association between the variables of interest. Structural Equation Modeling was employed to examine these associations. A selection of these participants ( $n=12$ ) were subsequently interviewed about their experiences of the menopause and put into the context of the developed model to provide potential explanations.

**Results:** The qualitative findings helped to corroborate the relationships in the model. Menopausal symptoms were significantly negatively related to both appearance and exercise, when mediated by subjective vitality (e.g., menopausal symptoms made some women feel tired, drained, not wanting to exercise and frustrated with bodily changes). Exercise was significantly associated with self-esteem and life satisfaction, when mediated by appearance (e.g., those that did not exercise, felt worse about their bodies, and so had lower wellbeing). The interviews helped to provide further insight into positive, negative and neutral experiences of the transition and how/why this influenced perceptions, decision making and behaviour.

**Conclusions:** Menopausal symptoms may act as a barrier to exercise participation by decreasing a woman's feelings of vitality; this in turn reduces perceptions of attractiveness, and then as a result decreases life satisfaction and self-esteem. We recommend that symptom perception, motivations to exercise, perceived control, and ability to cope (with symptoms, bodily changes and the life transition more generally) are additional factors considered by researchers and healthcare professionals in the future. In sum, it is not only important to consider methods to reduce symptoms, but also the impact symptoms have on health behaviour, body image and wellbeing.